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GEORGE RICE CARPENTER

By JEFFERSON BUTLER FLETCHER

By the death of George Rice Carpenter, which took place at his home in New York City on April 8, 1909, the Dante Society has lost one of its most devoted and distinguished members. While an undergraduate at Harvard University, Carpenter, under the inspiring guidance of Professor Norton, acquired an enthusiasm for the poetry of Dante which lasted throughout his life. Heavily burdened as he became with manifold intellectual and practical obligations, he never allowed a year to pass without rereading *The Divine Comedy*; and to the end he kept himself intelligently informed upon all essential scholarship touching Dante. Although in later years he published nothing on Italian literature, modestly deprecating his attainments in that field, many a friend and fellow student will bear grateful witness to the stimulating and clarifying ideas which discussion on the subject always elicited from him. Yet it was less as a scholar than as a disciple that Carpenter felt towards the great Florentine. He was most concerned to cut through the crust of accidental mediæval convention and of alien metaphysical theory to Dante's essential and, if I may so say, pragmatic thought and feeling, and to square Dante's answer to the riddle of life, so simplified, with his own. And fundamental sympathy there was between the mediæval master and the modern pupil. Born on the rugged Labrador coast of missionary parents, upheld through an unresting life of work by a rigid sense of duty, ever resolutely subduing to cool reasonableness and practical efficiency a temperament naturally wayward and passionate, with the imagination of a poet, dreaming dreams, this gentle unpretentious teacher, more and more as he grew with the years, came, for those who knew him best, to grow one in spirit with the master whom he loved. For him, as for that master, renunciation, as no ascetic penance but for self-effacing service, revealed itself as the secret of highest living. Puritan-mystic, he also might have said at the end:

All'alta fantasia qui mancò possa :
ma già volgeva il mio disiro e il velle,
si come ruota che igualmente è mossa,
L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle.

If Dante taught, or powerfully helped teach, Carpenter the ideal of renunciation, it may truly be said that one of the greatest renuncements of Carpenter's life was that of the study of Dante as a vocational end. He was always dreaming of a time when he might conscientiously withdraw from undergraduate teaching and academic administration enough to devote himself again seriously to Dante scholarship. But others — who shall say how wisely? — decided for him his greater serviceableness, and he always ended by yielding his own inclination. That inclination was indeed strong. He indulged it so far as he dared — and more than he should have dared — in hours stolen not indeed from his duties but from what ought to have been his rest. Within a month of his death he had concocted a scheme by which a slight increase of pressure all along the line was to yield an extra hour a day for a serious study of mediæval Italian poetry. Alas, he had sat on the safety valve too long.

Carpenter's actual contribution to our knowledge of Dante and his times thus came to be rather a fair promise than, in view of his wide learning and rare sympathy, a ripe fulfillment. His beginning indeed was brilliant. In the spring of 1888 he won the prize offered by this society with an essay entitled *The Episode of the Donna Pletosa, being an Attempt to reconcile the Statements in the Vita Nuova and the Convito concerning Dante's Life in the Years after the Death of Beatrice and before the Beginning of the Divina Commedia*. Of this essay an eminent Italian Dante scholar has written, "Più che un semplice saggio, ella è questa una dotta dissertazione che molto onora il Carpenter." The praise was certainly merited. Young Carpenter — he was only twenty-five — cut through the tangles of conflicting evidence and precarious surmise which had gathered about this crucial period of Dante's life with a clearness of vision and a sureness of touch only too rare among veteran scholars. And his argument, whether or no its conclusions be accepted, is one to be reckoned with still.

The essay at once won its author prominence in this society, which he served as secretary and treasurer from 1890 to 1893, and as vice president from 1893 to his voluntary retirement in 1904. He was

intrusted with the editing of the important *Documents concerning Dante's Public Life*, published in the tenth and eleventh annual reports of the society (1891-1892); and of C. S. Latham's translation of *Dante's Eleven Letters* (1891). During the winter of 1892-1893 he delivered a course of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston on early Italian lyric poetry. The substance of these he later, at Columbia University, incorporated into a course on the general development of European lyric poetry. For the *Columbia Literary Monthly*, April, 1895, he wrote on Lorenzo da Ponte, the earliest critic of Dante in America. In 1900 he translated and edited, for the Grolier Club of New York City, Boccaccio's *Life of Dante*.

Such, apart from occasional reviews of Italian books, is the sum of Carpenter's actual enouncement on Dante and on Italian literature, tantalizingly meager when we think what he, given opportunity, might have done. Yet if he was able to write but little of Dante, the influence of Dante is, I think, not obscurely felt in all his other writings and in his teaching. His style was austere direct and simple. Although generously prompt to probe through others' confused or imperfect expression of their underlying ideas, he refused to himself the privilege of being obscure. His final utterance was so simple, so natural, as to seem — to the common mind — commonplace; but the better informed his reader, the deeper and richer appeared the meaning. Yet with this instinct for clarity, this solicitude for filtering his thought into complete transparency, he combined an ever-present sense of realities, which, by taking thought however honestly and earnestly, we can but realize as through a glass darkly. In the sense that Dante was a mystic, he was a mystic. It was the mystic in him that drew him as a youth to the Hebrew writers, to Arabic, and to Dante, that gave him as a man a clew to the deeper things in Walt Whitman's poetry. It was the mystic in him, disciple of Dante, that made his beautiful clearness of thought placid and deep, never superficial or wholly seen through, like the clearness of shoal waters. Deeply though reticently religious, he lived the faith which Dante defines:

Fede è sostanza di cose sperate,
ed argomento delle non parventi.